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The Ultimate Play Room ... at Grandma's House

By ALINA DIZIK



Alina Dizik and interior designer Marlene Oliphant take a look at the fancy bedrooms and play spaces some couples are creating for their grandchildren. Photo: Pottery Barn Kids.

When Linda and George Harrington move to their new home in Sunset Beach, N.C., this May, their five grandchildren will have more than just a few toys to stay entertained. They'll all but own a good chunk of the house.

The Harringtons' three preteen granddaughters will have their own room with custom bunks that have built-in cubbies to hold electronics, plus a modern-style bathroom fully stocked with a rainbow of nail polish. The two grandsons will sleep in a separate room with ladders that lead to lofted beds and a large table for building model airplanes or playing with blocks. Downstairs, they'll have five swivel bar stools behind their own breakfast counter. "We thought of whatever we could to draw them there," says Ms. Harrington, 70, a retired elementary schoolteacher.

A New Way to Spoil the Grandkids

Rather than downsizing, retired grandparents like the Harringtons are making fundamental changes to their living spaces to accommodate their favorite overnight house guests—their grandchildren. Without the expenses of child-rearing, well-off grandparents are renovating basements to create children's suites and



Aron family

Carol and Dan Aron with one of their grandchildren.

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along with a white leather couch that sits across from a flat-screen TV. "I love the white leather and so does my grammy."

"They have a nice blend of spoiling [the grandchildren] while making them feel important" in other ways, says Cindy Blecha, the Harringtons' daughter.

To accommodate their five grandchildren, Carol, 64, and Dan Aron, 68, repurposed a cluttered attic into a sleeping area for four of them last year. In addition to two trundle beds, there are glow-in-the-dark stars on the sloped ceiling, hot-air balloons hand-painted on the walls, a closet door that doubles as a chalkboard and a teepee that the little ones can play or sleep in. Downstairs, they have their own play kitchen and workbenches, not to mention full run of the pool and basketball court. "They love coming to my house because Grandma has everything," says Ms. Aron, who sees her grandkids at least twice a month in her Northridge, Calif., home.

At Pottery Barn Kids, which offers customers free room-design services in its 84 stores, the most common request this year comes from grandparents looking to create nurseries in their home, says the company's president, Janet Hayes. "They decorate full rooms with the intention of creating a space for them to stay over," she says.

After noticing more grandparents in its stores last year, the company organized a letter-writing event to celebrate Grandparents Day in September. Kids could write and decorate letters that were then stamped and mailed from the stores. This year, Pottery Barn Kids will host four grandparent-related events, Ms. Hayes says.

Melanie Morris, an interior designer in Brookville, N.Y., has started working with more grandparents looking to design kids' rooms in their homes in the last few years. One of the more popular projects is to convert a seldom-used basement into a kid-friendly space complete with childproof padding on basement columns, mini trampolines or ping-pong tables, bedrooms for both kids and their parents and a bathroom. "It's like a little mini hotel suite for [grandchildren] in the basement," leaving the kids no reason not to stay for the weekend, she says.

upgrading bedrooms into full nurseries to ensure the little ones make repeat visits.

In a 2012 AARP survey of 1,904 grandparents, 25% said they spend \$1,000 or more a year on their grandchildren. As baby boomers become grandparents, they are increasingly active and want to interact more in the daily lives of their families than people from past generations, according to an AARP spokeswoman.

Isabelle Blecha, the Harringtons' 12-year-old granddaughter, has been "super excited" to help design her room, which has custom-built bunk beds. Recently, she picked out a lamp decorated with a pair of flip-flops,

Renovating a basement for small children can run more than \$100,000 for Ms. Morris's clients, while nurseries or single bedrooms cost as much as \$40,000 to \$60,000, she says. She designs the spaces in bright, modern colors, a style that's often less traditional than



Alyson Aliano for The Wall Street Journal

They remade their attic as a sleeping area.

the rest of the home. "They want to be perceived as hip and cool," Ms. Morris says of her clients.

Susanne Fougrousse, owner of Rosenberry Rooms, an online children's-furniture store in Raleigh, N.C., estimates 15% of her clientele are grandparents looking to buy items for their own homes. Cribs that cost an average of \$1,000 and hand-painted wooden letters that spell out the names of their grandkids are best-sellers. Personalized burlap tents have been another hit with grandparents who like the old-fashioned feel, she adds.

It's a far cry from the past, she says: "I remember going to my grandparents' and there were just glass figurines everywhere."

Dana Stegall, a 52-year-old grandmother of 12, says her grandkids love having their own space during their monthly visits to her Weatherford, Texas home. Upstairs, the kids sleep in cowboy-themed bunk beds complete with vintage rodeo posters. A special breakfast counter is low enough to fit little bodies in the kitchen. Outdoors, the grandkids play with scooters and a wooden jungle gym she and her husband bought after moving into their home last December.

The Stegalls are already brainstorming about what attention-grabbing toy to buy next, Mrs. Stegall says: "I know Papa wants to get a four-wheeler [all-terrain vehicle] for them to ride around in." Jeni Breeding, the Stegalls' daughter, allows her kids to do whatever they want besides videogames during their visits. "This is the point in her life where she gets to spoil them," she says of her mother.

For grandparents, creating rooms that can grow with the children or accommodate multiple grandkids from different families can be challenging. Often, they will purchase height-adjustable tables and chairs, choose unisex color schemes and pick stain-proof upholstery and removable floor tiles that hold up to spills, says interior designer Marlene Oliphant, who worked with the Arons.

Bathrooms are another challenge, says Vicky Serany, an interior designer in Apex, N.C., who has aided the Harringtons ahead of their move. Rather than doing his-and-hers sinks, Ms. Serany advises some grandparents to install a long trough to allow a gaggle of grandkids to brush teeth or wash hands at once. "It's not so stuffy. It's more playful for the children," she says. For easy access, showers are created without doors and bathrooms are often accessible from two bedrooms.

Grandparents, of course, can spoil the little ones without spending thousands. Juliet Shavitz, of Arlington Heights, Ill., incorporated heirlooms into a bedroom she has for her two granddaughters, whom she sees at least once a week. Ms. Shavitz filled the room with a wood rocker that was once hers, a needlepoint ottoman covering that was made by her own grandmother and Cabbage Patch Dolls her daughter once owned. In the bedroom's walk-in closet she set up a tiny desk and chair for art projects. Many of the items she owns are secondhand. "I have a kid's wicker chair that I got on garbage day," she says.

Ms. Shavitz's daughter-in-law, Andrea Shavitz, says her family jokes about when the children visit

their grandparents: "We say going it's like day camp and coming home is boot camp."

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